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BELIEF CONGRUENCE THEORY AND SCHOOL INTEGRATION.

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THIS STUDY COMBINED SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY AND EMPIRICAL RESEARCH TO TEST THE HYPOTHESIS THAT NEGRO AND WHITE PARENTS OF SIMILAR SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS WOULD NOT DIFFER SIGNIFICANTLY IN THEIR ATTITUDES TOWARD JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOLS OF VARYING RACIAL BALANCE IN BUFFALO, NEW YORK. THE THEORETICAL VIEWPOINT WHICH WAS TESTED IN THIS RESEARCH WAS ROKEACH'S FORMULATION THAT BELIEF CONGRUENCE TRANSCENDS ETHNIC DIFFERENCE. DATA FROM SEGREGATED INTERVIEWS OF 80 NEGRO AND 70 WHITE RANDOMLY SELECTED PARENTS DID NOT SUPPORT THE HYPOTHESIS. IT WAS FOUND THAT NEGROES AND PARENTS WITH A GREAT DEAL OF EDUCATION HAD LOWER MEAN ACCEPTANCE SCORES THAN WHITES AND PARENTS WITH LESS EDUCATION, INDICATING THAT BOTH RACE AND EDUCATION AFFECTED PARENT ATTITUDE SCORES. THE FINDINGS OF ROKEACH'S ORIGINAL STUDY APPEARED TO BE INAPPLICABLE BECAUSE OF THE NATURE OF HIS SAMPLE GROUP AND THE ABSTRACT QUALITY OF THE ISSUES POSED TO HIS SUBJECTS. THE UNEXPECTED RACE DIFFERENCES FOUND IN THE RESPONSES TO THE MORE IMMEDIATE AND CONCRETE QUESTIONS OF THE BUFFALO STUDY MIGHT BE ATTRIBUTED TO "AN UNDERLYING THREAT TO SELF-ESTEEM AND/OR STATUS," AND, IT IS POINTED OUT, PEOPLE WHO PERCEIVE SCHOOL INTEGRATION AS A THREAT ARE LIKELY "TO CONFORM TO INSTITUTIONALIZED NORMS OF THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE" AND, THEREFORE, TO MANIFEST RACIAL PREJUDICE. THIS ARTICLE WAS PUBLISHED IN THE "URBAN EDUCATION," VOLUME 2, NUMBER 3, 1966. (NH)

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BELIEF CONGRUENCE THEORY AND SCHOOL INTEGRATION

SAMUEL L. WOODARD

The present study has been an attempt to apply social-psychological theory and empirical research to an issue which has been timely and important to urban education. Following Rokeach's theoretical formulation that belief congruence transcends ethnic difference,[1] an effort was made to ascertain whether socio-economic or racial factors, including racial balance, are stronger in affecting attitudes toward school.

The major hypothesis was: There is no significant difference between attitudes of Negro and white parents of similar socio-economic status toward junior high schools of varying racial balance attended by their children in Buffalo, New York.

A review of the related literature disclosed evidence to the effect that: (1) Attitudes toward school are a function of an individual's socio-economic position, and vary according to educational level; (2) Parents, both Negro and white, are largely satisfied with their schools; (3) Negro and white parents of one study did not differ significantly in mean school acceptance; (4) Education is the single most desirable index of socio-economic status for the present research situation.

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During the summer of 1965, eighty Negro and seventy white randomly selected parents were interviewed. The assignment of interviewers and interviewees was on a segregated basis to increase the probability of eliciting honest responses.

For comparing Negro and white parents and testing hypotheses, analysis of variance was utilized with the mean as a measure of central tendency. Through these procedures, results were obtained which at times did not conform to expectations. For example, contrary to the prediction of the guiding theory, this study indicates there is a relationship between race and parental attitudes toward junior high schools of varying racial

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[1]Milton Rokeach, *The Open and Closed Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1960), p. 135.

balance in Buffalo, New York. The pattern is that Negroes have lower mean school acceptance scores than whites. Therefore, the major hypothesis of no difference between attitudes of Negro and white parents was rejected.

There is also a relationship between education, which served as the index of socio-economic status, and attitudes. Parents with high education (twelve-sixteen years) have lower mean school acceptance scores than parents with low education (one-eleven years). Apparently both race and education affect parental attitude scores, as indicated by the approximately equal means of the sample groups. A direct application of Rokeach's theory to this situation would have caused one to predict that race would not have influenced attitudes to this extent. In fact, race should have been overshadowed by education. This would appear to be an important finding. It will be discussed more fully in the section on theoretical implications.

No evidence was found of a relationship between school racial balance, sex, or geographic mobility and parental attitudes. There was also no evidence to suggest the race-attitude relationship differs across sex groups, geographic mobility groups, or school groups.

In general the parents of the sample seem satisfied with the schools—even the one which has a ninety-nine per cent Negro student body. This appears to suggest that the mere fact of integrating or segregating a school does not necessarily cause most parents to reject it. Consequently, the vociferous interest groups who decry either type of school would not seem to reflect majority opinion.

Parental comments were more severe in general than in specifics, and seemed to reflect a shallow conceptulization of the school, and manifested diverse social class values.

According to the theoretical formulation from which guidelines were derived for this research, it was hypothesized that there would be no difference in the attitudes of Negro and white parents. However, the major finding of this research is that parental attitudes toward school are related to race. How can this be?

Rokeach based his theory on two salient factors which were not duplicated in the present study. First, all of his subjects were students at Michigan State University. It is common knowledge that individuals with high education are less likely than the general population to decide issues primarily

on a racial basis.[2] Second, the issues posed to subjects could be characterized as abstract.

For example, the one school issue is of a general nature. Rokeach offered subjects a choice of being friends with either a person who favors immediate desegregation or a person who favors gradual desegregation.[3] This study asked parents to react to the concrete fact of having had their children enrolled in schools with from fifteen to ninety-nine per cent Negro students for at least a year.

Further, since parents were specifically asked if they would want to attend their child's school, it seems probable that they were less inclined than the college students to view the issue as distant, abstract, or something to intellectualize about.

Perhaps issues of this nature, from concrete life situations, would have elicited responses inconsistent with the theory. Admittedly the object for acceptance or rejection in this study was an institution instead of a person, but Rokeach himself indicated other bases might be considered:

> We have no way of knowing at this point whether the results would have been different had we . . . asked for ratings of acceptance-rejection on some other basis, for example, in terms of working on the same job, living in the same apartment house, eating together, etc. It will be interesting to see what results will be obtained with such variations . . . in further attempts to evaluate the race vs. belief issue.[4]

Apparently the unanticipated race difference can also be partially attributed to an underlying threat to self-esteem and/or status. In this context a threat is conceptualized as that which is perceived as diminishing an individual's self-esteem and/or status.

First, it has been theorized by Gardner Murphy, a psychologist, that the primary root of ethnic prejudice is a hunger

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[2]See Melvin Tumin, Paul Barton, and Bernie Burrus, "Education, Prejudice and Discrimination: A Study in Readiness for Desegregation," *American Sociological Review*, XXXIII (February, 1958), 41-42, 46.

[3]Rokeach, op. cit., p. 138.

[4]*Ibid.*, p. 157.

for higher status.[5] David Riesman has stated well the importance of status. "Our culture lives by . . . judgments of superiority and subordination, and differences among races, classes, and individual personalities are largely made use of to place oneself and others in the social hierarchy."[6]

Whether this viewpoint is accepted or not is less important than the indisputable fact that a premium is usually placed on status in American society, and that losing status is seldom thought desirable. Samuel Stouffer, former director of the Laboratory of Human Relations at Harvard University, pointed out that prejudice is, for most people, a matter of conforming "to the norms of those associates whose sanctions are most salient to them."[7]

Second, Havighurst has predicted theoretically that whites will leave a school district in considerable numbers when the status-race ratio reaches a critical point.[8] Observation discloses a pattern consistent with this theory. Indeed, it is a truism that whites tend to move into the suburbs as more Negroes move into their urban neighborhoods.

How does this relate to the theory about race vs. belief? Rokeach has concluded from his research that belief congruence transcends ethnic difference. To be sure, this is true for some issues. Yet the possibility remains that many of the negative attitudes expressed toward integrated schools are primarily because of a Negro stereotype, not because of belief incongruence with a specific Negro.

More precisely, the white exodus from a school district with sixty per cent Negro students—a proportion which is considered acceptable if it is white—usually starts when the non-white percentage is much lower. The assumption here is that there is a propensity to associate high status with racially

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[5]Gordon Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (New York: Doubleday, 1958,) p. 348.

[6]David Riesman, *Individualism Reconsidered* (New York: Doubleday, 1954), p. 44.

[7]Samuel Stouffer, *Social Research to Test Ideas* (New York: Glencoe, 1962), p. 234.

[8]Robert Havighurst, "Metropolitan Development and the Education System," August Kerber and Barbara Bommarito (eds.), *The Schools and the Urban Crisis* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), pp. 47-48. This involves a status ratio and race index. When either of these reach a certain critical point, it is predicted that middle-class parents will "stream out of a school district as if by common agreement."

exclusive school communities. It seems probable that many whites never give rational consideration to their beliefs in comparison to those of incoming Negroes, because the quintessence of prejudice is irrational thinking.

On another level Rokeach does not explain why informal adolescent groups within integrated schools, as well as outside of them, tend so often to be formed on the basis of racial categories. The facts of common observation as well as systematic research indicate clearly that adolescents are inclined to follow the same in-group out-group thinking patterns of their parents.[9] Belief congruence with their peers would not seem to be a primary consideration.

The foregoing discussion implies that the unexpected racial difference appears to have occurred in part because the theory did not sufficiently concern itself with concrete, real life issues —at least not to the extent the present research did. That is, the theory does not seem to hold for this kind of school integration issue.

In conclusion, perhaps a statement of caution such as the following should be added to Rokeach's theoretical framework: Persons who perceive an issue, such as school integration, to threaten their self-esteem and/or status are likely to conform to institutionalized norms of the social structure, and manifest racial prejudice, which can preclude the possibility of belief congruence transcending race.

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[9]August Hollingshead, *Elmtown's Youth* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1949), p. 1. The major hypothesis, which was accepted, was that "the social behavior of adolescents is functionally related to the position their families occupy in the community's social structure."